An Overview of Transpersonal Psychology

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ABSTRACT: An overview of transpersonal psychology is provided with specific focus on a number of its central themes (nonduality, intrinsic health, self-transcendence, and inclusivity) and practices (meditation, ritual, and inquiry). The relationship of transpersonal psychology to both mainstream psychology and spiritual wisdom traditions is discussed. The field's implications for diversity issues, research, and service applications are also considered.

Some thirty years after its birth as a semi-autonomous field of study, transpersonal psychology is moving into a new level of maturity. Its central interests are becoming both more well-defined and more broad-ranging. Its applications in clinical and counseling psychology, health care, social services, education, business settings, and community development are growing in number and depth (Boucouvalas, 1999). Its research base is more substantial and mature, contributing not only research findings, but useful instruments and research approaches. The work of Wilber (1999) on integral psychology, and critiques to his work such as those by Washburn (1995), has given transpersonal psychology a stronger and more substantial theory base. However, transpersonal psychology is also a field ripe for more maturity, integration, and contribution to the world. Those involved with transpersonal psychology can feel both accomplishment and challenge to do more. Those new to transpersonal psychology and those skeptical about it might want to take a closer look at its contributions and potential.

This article offers an overview of transpersonal psychology. After defining transpersonal psychology, it touches on four broad issues I feel are central to this field's ongoing development: its relationships to mainstream psychology and spiritual wisdom traditions, cultural diversity (including cultural misappropriation), transpersonal research and research methods, and its application to service.

A Definition

Transpersonal psychology is the field of psychology which integrates psychological concepts, theories, and methods with the subject matter and practices of the spiritual disciplines. It uses both quantitative and qualitative methods; its central concepts are nonduality, self-transcendence, and optimal human development and mental health; and its core practices include meditation and ritual. Transpersonal psychologists' interests include the assessment, characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of spiritual and self-transcendent experiences, mystical states of consciousness, mindfulness and meditative practices, and shamanic states. Transpersonal psychologists are also interested in the embodiment and integration of these states into everyday life, as well as in the overlap of spiritual experiences with disturbed states such as psychosis and depression, the assessment and promotion of transpersonal characteristics in individuals, and the transpersonal dimensions of interpersonal relationships, community, service, and encounters with the natural world.

Transpersonal psychology is based on *nonduality*, the recognition that each part (e.g., each person) is fundamentally and ultimately a part of the whole (the cosmos). This view is radically different from psychological approaches founded on the premises of mechanism, atomism, reductionism, and separateness. From this insight come two other central insights: the *intrinsic health* and basic goodness of the whole and each of its parts and the validity of *self-transcendence* from the conditional and conditioned personality to a sense of identity which is deeper, broader, and more unified with the whole (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a).

The root of the term, transpersonal or "beyond the personal," reflects this impulse toward that which is more universal than individual identity. Since the root of the word, personal, comes from *persona* or the masks worn by Greek actors to portray characters, transpersonal means literally "beyond the mask." These masks both hid the actor and revealed the actor's role. Following this metaphor, transpersonal psychology seeks to disclose and develop the source and deeper nature of identity, being, and ground. It is important to note that nonduality and self-transcendence do not negate the importance of embodiment, individuality, and personalness. Transpersonal psychology's orientation is inclusive, valuing and in-

tegrating the following: psychological and spiritual development; the personal and the transpersonal; exceptional mental health, ordinary experience, and states of suffering; ordinary and extraordinary states of consciousness; the transpersonal aspects of modern Western perspectives, Eastern wisdom traditions, (some) postmodern insights, and many indigenous traditions; and analytical intellect and contemplative ways of knowing. For example, Wilber's (1999, 2000) integral approach continues to advance the articulation of this inclusive view, maintaining both the validity and the limitations of various psychological approaches.

Transpersonal psychology is a field of inquiry which includes theory, research, and practice, offering insights based on research, experience, and practices for evaluating and confirming or disconfirming its findings. It is scientific in the broad sense of the phenomenological or human sciences, including but not being limited to positivistic approaches. Overlaps between psychology and spirituality have been present in both psychology (e.g., James [1902/1958], Jung [1965], and Maslow [1971] and in the spiritual traditions which have their own rich views of development, cognition, social interactions, suffering, and healing). Transpersonal psychology has highlighted this overlap, allowing further development of theory and applications.

Transpersonal psychology has benefits for both psychology and the spiritual disciplines. Psychology can expand toward a fuller and richer accounting of the complete range of experience and human potential, incorporating practices that speak more directly and completely to the depth of human nature. The spiritual disciplines can integrate insights and skills about human development, emotional healing, and psychological growth to deal more skillfully with various impediments to spiritual development, such as resistance to change and transformation, unresolved childhood trauma and abuse, the inner critic or superego as it appears on the spiritual journey (Brown, 1999), and spiritual awakening which is so disintegrating and difficult that it becomes a spiritual emergency (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1992; Watson, 1994). Spiritual traditions can use these issues as gateways, rather than obstacles, to self-realization.

Transpersonal Practices

A core practice for transpersonal psychology includes meditation, mindfulness, and contemplation. Comparing the role of medi-

tation in transpersonal psychology to the role of dreams in psychoanalysis, Walsh and Vaughan (1993a) called meditation "the royal road to the transpersonal" (p. 47). In this broad category, I would include other awareness practices such as Gendlin's (1982) focusing technique drawn from phenomenological philosophy and psychotherapy. While meditation and related practices can be used for self-regulation, relaxation, and pain control or for self-exploration and self-therapy, they have traditionally been used for self-transcendence (Shapiro, 1994). Despite their many surface forms, most styles of meditation can be a means of disidentifying from our masks or egos and realizing our fundamental nonduality (Goleman, 1996).

While ritual has not been identified as a core practice in transpersonal psychology, it is central in many cultural and religious traditions that promote spiritual values. For people in many cultures, ritual is the central means of discovering and developing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal connections (e.g., Somé, 1998). It provides a means of communicating with the unconscious, with each other, with the collective, and with spirit. It gives, or reveals, a deeper significance to our actions and relationships, creating deeper meaning, and it offers a sense of sanctuary within the ritual container for exposing and exploring deep and potentially difficult or disintegrating experience. As a practice, it beckons us to the interface of mundane and sacred, intention and surrender. Once we tune into ritual, we start recognizing that we live in a sea of ritual, largely unaware of it, and that contemplative practice and ritual are highly complementary and synergistic.

Recently, Almaas (1986, 2002; Davis, 1999) has introduced and described what he calls the practice of inquiry. It is based on the open-ended exploration of present experience in a way which deepens and expands immediate, lived understanding (Usatynski, 2001). This practice includes meditative present-centeredness and openness, psychodynamic and developmental perspectives on ego-based blocks to full development, and spiritual insight and access to what he calls *essence*. Almaas argues that the practice of inquiry leads to the immediate experience, understanding, and integration of presence, completeness, and nonduality. While this approach is relatively new, several prominent transpersonalists have reviewed it favorably (Cortright, 1997; Kornfield, 1993; Wilber, 1997). It holds much promise as a transpersonal method for bridging western philosophical traditions and eastern contemplative traditions. Other practices that are associated with transpersonal psychology include

shamanism, lucid dreaming, psychedelic drugs, and expressive arts (Franklin, 2000; Rugenstein, 2000; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a).

Psychology and Spiritual Wisdom Traditions

There are several possibilities for the role of transpersonal psychology in relation to psychology and spiritual wisdom traditions, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Transpersonal psychology can be considered an area of psychology. The definition above makes it sound so; the same algorithm that defines other areas of psychology can be used with transpersonal psychology. Just as health psychology applies psychology to medical and health care concerns or school psychology applies psychology to school settings, transpersonal psychology applies psychology to a specific range of concerns (e.g., spirituality, optimal mental health, nonduality, and the quality of nonreactive presence and awareness). Each of these interfaces brings new questions and generates new approaches, but they still fall within the broad outlines of psychology. I see the work of James (1902/1958), Jung (1965), and Maslow (1971) as examples of this approach to transpersonal psychology.

On the other hand, is transpersonal psychology closer to spirituality than psychology? As such, it may be in a position to use modern psychology as a paradigm for translating the substance of the spiritual wisdom traditions into the contemporary culture. As previous forms of spiritual expression weaken or evolve, our deep hunger for the spiritual expresses itself in new ways. Since our culture is so psychologically-oriented, transpersonal psychology could be an avenue for reintroducing spiritual insights and practices as well as for developing new ones. Other arenas for such a bridging include education (e.g., Kessler, 2000), medicine (e.g., Dossey, 1997) and environmental issues (e.g., Davis, 1998; Fox, 1990; Winter, 1996).

Transpersonal psychology is not a spiritual system, per se. However, is it possible that it is a step toward a uniquely contemporary spirituality? Psychology has provided many insights which can support spiritual development (even though virtually all mainstream psychological approaches have either ignored or explicitly denied spirituality). There is wisdom in the psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and systems perspectives that is useful to those exploring spirituality. Deep psychological experience, supported by any of these approaches, can unfold into the transpersonal.

We can move from using psychology as a tool for self-regulation and self-exploration to using it for self-transcendence and liberation. In this view, transpersonal psychology could emerge as the flowering of 100 years of psychology and a vehicle for the emergence of a new, multi-faceted world wisdom tradition. What are the dangers of seeing transpersonal psychology as a conduit for bringing spiritual wisdom into our time and place or as the beginnings of a new wisdom tradition? What are the possibilities?

Transpersonal Psychology and Diversity

Transpersonal psychology has been influenced at least as much by Asian and indigenous spiritual systems as by European psychological and philosophical traditions (see, for example, the section on "Cross-Cultural Roots" in Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996). It has strong connections to the meditative traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism, first-nation peoples' shamanic traditions, indigenous African wisdom, and esoteric and gnostic European systems such as alchemy and Celtic mysticism. From its origins, transpersonal psychology has been strongly multicultural. As psychology (and modern western culture) wakes up to the reality of diversity and multicultural perspectives, transpersonal psychology has much to contribute.

Transpersonal psychology values the diversity of expressions of human experience while recognizing the universality of its deeper dimensions. It actively seeks out and integrates insights on human nature and healing from a wide variety of cultures and recognizes the role of the cultural context in the experience of individuals and groups. Transpersonal psychology requires us to challenge our culturally-defined views of mental health and psychotherapy and to draw cross-cultural insights into its practices and applications. And, it can and should do more in this area.

It seems to me that transpersonal psychology recognizes two responses to the question of diversity. From one perspective, it recognizes and honors the astounding variety of the manifestations of being. The role of cultural diversity is becoming well-established in transpersonal psychology (Hastings, Balasubrahmanyam, Beaird, Ferguson, Kango, & Raley, 2001), and there is good work on gender, age, sexual orientation, and biodiversity in relation to spirituality. However, in my view, work relating transpersonal psychology to issues of social class is notably missing.

The value in diversity also extends to definitions of mental health and healing practices. For example, from a modern Eurocentric point of view, many experiences in meditation or shamanic initiations (e.g., hallucinations, dissociations, body-image distortions) would be seen as pathological. However, from the perspective of meditative traditions or indigenous cultures, these may be seen as normal signs of development or even indications of extraordinary mental health. Hearing the voices of one's ancestors would likely trigger psychiatric treatment in a modern mental health center, but they could be cause for celebration as a shamanic call among indigenous people. Transpersonal psychology seeks to examine critically (as well as experientially) such nonordinary states in order to distinguish their healthy, growthful aspects from their pathological, regressive aspects. At the same time, I would add that transpersonal psychology's primary focus is not (or should not be) on states of consciousness, per se, but on the meaning of such states for individuals and their communities and on "the ground out of which all states arise" (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993b, p. 202).

Transpersonal psychology also recognizes universal dimensions of being and the unity that underlies the variety of forms. From this perspective, differences shift to the background, and the fundamental nonduality of the universe comes to the foreground. Holism underpins the transpersonal approach. Transpersonal psychology has been criticized for emphasizing this oneness at the expense of diversity, and this criticism should be heard. I find myself particularly drawn to the argument that unity is an easier position to adopt for those in power than for those who are marginalized. The shadow of "We are one" may be blindness to subtle forms of discrimination and disempowerment. Nevertheless, unity is at the foundation of a transpersonal view.

A discussion of the multicultural dimensions of transpersonal psychology brings the question of cultural misappropriation. A shadow of appreciating cultural diversity can arise in the use of the wisdom or practices of other cultures. Simply put, this use is offensive to some. For example, this issue has been stated clearly by some Native American Indians in relation to the ceremonial use of sage, feathers, and other icons of Native American Indian spiritual practices and to wilderness rites of passage similar to vision quests. Objections to non-Indians guiding such rituals stem from concerns that the rituals have been commercialized and that they have been stripped of their larger spiritual and cultural context. In some cases,

these objections are quite strong and the source of much distress and anger. In many other cases, there is a sincere welcoming of non-Indians who are genuinely open and supportive of Native American spirituality.

It is important, in my opinion, to do our best not to misappropriate others' cultural and spiritual practices and views. Yet, there are a number of more subtle factors which make this more difficult to implement. Some members of a particular culture have offered their practices while other members have been upset; there are sometimes significant internal schisms within ethnic communities about inviting nonmembers in. For example, Tibetan Buddhists have welcomed many Westerners into traditional rituals and practices, and some Native Americans have taught and empowered non-Indians to participate in and use traditional ritual forms.

Furthermore, I suggest that some forms of earth-centered ritual practice are native to a place and not just to a people. Those living in the same place, regardless of their ethnic roots, may find themselves drawn to similar practices independently, inasmuch as these practices reflect the character and affordances of a particular place. Those practicing earth-centered rituals in the western part of North America are likely to discover the use of sage as ritual incense, whether they are imitating American Indians or not. Deserts can call for certain initiatory practices regardless of one's heritage or bloodlines, woodlands for others. This ecopsychological argument suggests that transpersonal practices are not completely separate from place, and it encourages the creation of ritual forms that are sensitive to the potentials of particular places.

While the surface structure of spiritual practices may differ, their archetypal deep structures are similar or identical. In the case of rites of passage, many cultures, at some point in the past, practiced what amounts to a vision quest. This makes it more difficult to distinguish the enactment of an essentially human practice from the misappropriation of another culture's spiritual practice. For example, the work of Foster and Little (1997) and Foster (1998, 1999) on wilderness rites of passage and wilderness-based ecopsychology draws on a broad base of cultures, including Native American Indian, Celtic, and Mesoamerican, and moves beyond the surface structures of particular forms to the deeper, archetypal roots of passage rites and initiatory work.

I suggest here a balanced approach with two aspects. First, those involved in spiritual or transpersonal practices should be espe-

cially alert to possible misappropriation or misuse of another culture's practices. Second, those involved in transpersonal practices should be clear that the ground of their practices lies in their own experience and not in an idealized or romanticized abstraction of others' practices. This is a call for a balance of humble consideration for the sensitive terrain of culturally-based spiritual practices and confident assertiveness in the human right to dig deep into our intrinsic wisdom and recreate spiritual forms appropriate to our time and place. This is not easy ground to walk, and it calls for extra vigilance and openness.

Note also that the argument that the land itself is predisposed to certain transpersonal practices has transpersonal elements in it. Ritual practices may arise as a transaction between person and place, and the more transpersonal one's perspective, the more those practices will reflect that transaction. Similarly, the argument that transpersonal practices reflect archetypal dimensions of the collective unconscious or that they reflect certain universals of advanced integral human development also draws on the transpersonal themes of nonduality and self-transcendence. Transpersonal psychology, itself, can contribute to the discussion of the cultural dimensions of transpersonal practices.

Research and Transpersonal Psychology

One of my favorite final exam questions in my undergraduate transpersonal psychology courses went something like this: "What does transpersonal psychology need most in order to advance as a field?" The majority of students over more than a dozen years answered, "More and better research." One likely explanation for this, of course, is "instructor-bias," indicating my own sense that transpersonal psychology's research base could be stronger. However, I do not discount the genuineness of students' call for a strong research base for this field. I am happy to say that in the five years since I taught the undergraduate course, the research base in transpersonal psychology has grown considerably. I wonder how students would answer that question now.

Since its beginning, transpersonal psychologists have argued for a psychological research paradigm which was broader and deeper than one based on scientism, reductionism, and mechanism. With developments in qualitative research methods, human science, and methodological pluralism, it seems that many psychological re-

searchers are recognizing this need. Transpersonal psychology researchers have continued to refine and develop research tools and methods appropriate to its subject matter. Taylor (1992) suggested that one of the main contributions of transpersonal psychology is, in fact, its role in promoting alternatives to an overly-quantitative psychology.

A number of transpersonal psychologists, including Maslow (1966) and Wilber (1983), have argued that a strategy of complementarity (i.e., a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and contemplative methods) is best for the study of transpersonal phenomena (see also Davis, 1996). There is a growing body of quantitative research findings and measures of transpersonal phenomena, especially on meditation (Walsh, 1996) and transpersonal assessment (MacDonald, LeClair, Holland, Alter, & Friedman, 1995; MacDonald, Friedman, & Kuentzel, 1999; MacDonald, Kuentzel, & Friedman, 1999). This research is complemented by a similar growth in qualitative research findings and methods (Braud & Anderson, 1998; Nagel, 1999). I would add that it is also essential for transpersonal psychologists to develop research paradigms appropriate to its unique subject matter or to draw from advanced practitioners of spiritual wisdom traditions for these research paradigms.

Good research in transpersonal psychology is valuable in its own right, developing and deepening the field's contributions. As an educator of transpersonal psychologists, I feel another benefit of the research aspects of transpersonal psychology comes from teaching research methods. Good research requires and develops certain skills and qualities of heart and mind that are important to one's personal/transpersonal journey. A good scientist is attentive, curious, alert to the evidence at hand, creative, intuitive, able to discriminate parts and perceive wholes, sensitive to personal bias, humble in the face of unsupported hypotheses, patient, and dedicated to the truth above all else. I think these are also the qualities of a sincere transpersonal practitioner and useful ideals for those applying transpersonal psychology in any area of service.

When I first began teaching research courses in a transpersonal counseling psychology program, I had been teaching psychological research methods for many years in a traditional psychology department. It was easy to develop the core material for the transpersonal course since transpersonal psychology has used and benefited from most research paradigms in psychology, including quantitative, qualitative, and contemplative research methods (although it has

been more difficult to identify specific contemplative research methods). The next step in my teaching was becoming aware of, and skillful at, working with the emotional aspects of students' responses to working with logic and statistics. Many had a view of transpersonal psychology which split off such "left-brained" approaches, and some were using this split to avoid math wounds and what they felt to be their incapacity to engage in precise linear and critical thinking. As these elements of the course came together, I realized that learning and applying research methods could be an arena for developing capacities essential for transpersonal growth, counseling, and service. Learning research methods became a transpersonal practice; I still see it this way.

Applications of Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology must respond to the needs of others and the world if it is to have lasting value or credibility. Service is a core value of transpersonal psychology. As such, transpersonal psychology is being applied in many ways, including counseling and clinical psychology, education, organizational development, health care, and business.

Vaughan (1979) proposed looking at three dimensions of transpersonal psychotherapy: content, process, and context. I have found it useful to apply these three dimensions to other applications of transpersonal psychology. Drawing on the core assumptions of transpersonal psychotherapy, a transpersonal context for any application of transpersonal psychology can be said to include the following assumptions: our essential nature is multidimensional and includes a transpersonal or spiritual dimension, contacting that transpersonal dimension is possible and growthful, service should be mindful and present-centered regardless of the particular content or processes, and service should be seen both as an act of generosity for others and as an act of work on oneself (Wittine, 1993; Cortright, 1997).

A transpersonal view points to authentic service which is nondualistic, selfless, and oriented to process as well as outcome. Transpersonal service is a natural reflexive response springing from awareness, love, generosity, and openness. Expressing this reflex requires understanding and working through the barriers to authentic service (e.g., the sense of deficiency and grandiosity, helping as a way of avoiding one's own pain, and the self-image of being a

helper) and developing and integrating the capacities to serve in a mature way. We also expect such service to be informed by skillful means.

An important research study examines the transpersonal context of service. Montgomery (1991) found that the best caregivers (in her research, nurses identified by other nurses as being exceptional at their work) expressed a sense of transcendence, the experience of being part of a larger whole, and a spiritual base for their work (though they said this in many different ways, usually not in the language of specific spiritual or religious approaches). These nurses were intimately involved with patients on emotional and transpersonal levels, and as a result, they experienced helping as a source of energy rather than burnout.

Montgomery points out that these results were paradoxical and counterintuitive. These findings challenge the conventional psychological wisdom that to avoid burnout, one should not get too involved with clients. These exceptional caregivers were the ones *most* involved with their patients. Finding a transcendent basis for service and being deeply involved with those in our care opens caregivers up to a source of energy and sustenance which reduces burnout. In some ways, it makes transpersonal service more emotionally demanding than keeping a distance, but holding ourselves back from caring deeply is, in the long run, more detrimental.

This research also makes it clear that transpersonal context matters in the outcomes of caregiving, both for the giver as well as for the recipient. Deeper caring and more emotional and transpersonal involvement between professionals and those who are served (in ways that are based on a clear sense of professional ethics and skillful handling of relationship, transference, and countertransference issues) will reduce burnout and promote growth in both caregivers as well as those we care for. I feel these conclusions apply across many settings in which transpersonal psychologists work.

Conclusion

In this article, I focused on the implications and potential for transpersonal psychology in four areas: its relationship to psychology and spiritual wisdom traditions, cultural diversity, research, and service. There are others which need to be developed as well. I think particularly of responses to the problems of war, terrorism, injustice (economic, social, and political), and environmental problems, in

short, a "socially-engaged spirituality" (Rothberg, 1999). Transpersonal psychology has the potential to develop and apply responses to terrorism, large-scale trauma, healing, conflict resolution, and cultural transformation. It has perspectives and tools which can be applied to the psychological causes and consequences of global and local environmental devastation. While these problems seem overwhelming and intractable, transpersonal psychology has insights and practices to support actions which are sustainable for the long run. Such problems take enormous compassion and a deep grounding in a perspective which is deeper than the problem. My hope is that transpersonal psychology can help facilitate and clarify the radical change necessary to continue doing this work in the face of such long odds.

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